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Psychology professor William Lewinski under fire over ‘pseudoscience’

NO MATTER the circumstance, his conclusion is always the same. It wasn’t their fault. Now the psychologist who gets paid \$1000 an hour to get cops off in court has come under fire.

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● AUGUST 5, 2015 4:56PM



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William Lewinski, a psychologist and the founder of the Force Institute, a company that studies human behaviour in high stress situations, defends police officers who have shot people under questionable circumstances. Picture: Michal Czerwonka/The New York Times

HE IS the man the cops turn to when they get in strife.

The psychology professor whose expertise in “lethal force encounters” has made him the go-to guy to testify at trials that involve officers shooting suspects dead; and he does so for about \$1300 an hour.

William J Lewinski’s apparent popularity with law enforcement centres on his ability to explain the unexplainable — no matter how far fetched — even if the suspect is unarmed.

For almost two decades, the academic has successfully sold his theory that an officer has about one and a half seconds to draw his gun whenever he fears danger; therefore, he is always justified in shooting first.

This theory applies when witness testimony, forensic evidence or video footage contradicts the officer’s story and even when a suspect has been shot in the back because, according to Lewinski, a suspect can turn around in the time it takes an officer to pull his gun.

And even when there is irrefutable evidence of an officer clearly overstepping the

mark — such as if the suspect is unarmed — Lewinski has another answer: inattentional blindness. The term describes when the brain focuses on one task and blocks out all others.

But not everyone is buying what Lewinski has to sell.

Despite his long list of academic achievements (he has a PhD in psychology, is a professor emeritus of law enforcement at Minnesota State University and was named Distinguished Professor of the Year for the College of Social and Behavioural Sciences) critics have labelled his brand of behavioural science research as “pseudoscience”.

“People die because of this stuff,” John Burton, a California lawyer who specialises in police misconduct cases told [The New York Times](#). “When they give these cops a pass, it just ripples through the system.”

The use of excessive force in the US has become a national talking point in the wake of the shooting deaths of a number of unarmed, mostly African American, citizens such as [Tamir Rice](#), [Walter Scott](#) and [Sam Dubose](#).

Debate has centred on encouraging officers to use de-escalating tactics rather than the apparent shoot-to-kill practice.

However Lewinski appears to argue the opposite, saying that advice to officers to read the threat before acting would put their own lives in harm’s way.

“We’re telling officers, ‘Look for cover and then read the threat’ ... Sorry too damn late.”

He has appeared as an expert witness or consulted in almost 200 officer shooting cases in the US over the past decade.

While not all those matters have resulted in the officer being exonerated, many have.

According to [The New York Times](#), Lewinski says his research is based on hard science, research that he began almost two decades ago.

However, his research has only ever been published in *The Police Marksman* magazine, a journal specifically for US police officers. It has never been published in an academic journal and therefore has never been peer-reviewed.

The only time his work has been professionally criticised was in 2012 when the US Justice Department and a private lawyer asked Washington State University professor and *American Journal of Psychology* editor Lisa Fournier to review his studies in the matter of *Hope Glenn v Washington County*.

Mrs Glenn sued the Washington County Sherriff Deputies department after two officers fatally shot her son Lukus outside the family home in September 2006.

According to [court documents](#), Mrs Glenn called the police to attend their home when 18-year-old Lukus turned up intoxicated, agitated and began threatening to slash his own throat with a knife.

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Police shot Tamir Rice, 12, in Cleveland, Ohio, after he pulled a BB gun on them. Picture: Facebook

The two officers who responded to the 911 call, Mikhail Gerba and Tim Mateski, repeatedly told Lukus to put his knife down. When he failed to do so they shot him. The Glens and two of Lukus's friends watched the shooting unfold. They claimed the officers used excessive force.

During the trial, the deputies gave different versions of events.

Lewinski testified that the potential explanation for why they changed parts of their stories was that officers in distressing situations narrowed their attention to focus on something important, losing sight of other things, as he found in a study he conducted with police in the UK, [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#) reported.

He also revealed he was paid more than \$13,000 for his testimony and work on the case.

After examining Lewinski's research, Mr Fournier called it pseudoscience, adding it was "invalid and unreliable"

"In my opinion, this study questions the ability of Mr Lewinski to apply relevant and reliable data to answer a question or support an argument," [she wrote](#). "That is, if one cannot report relevant and reliable data to answer a question posed in one's own research study, how can one trust that this person can apply relevant and reliable data to support conclusions he has drawn from the current case. The loose connections between data and one's premise can lead to misleading, inaccurate, and unreliable statements/conclusions."

The Justice Department subsequently denounced his findings as "lacking in both foundation and reliability".

The Glens were awarded about \$US2.5 million compensation.

Lewinski told The New York Times that Ms Fournier's assessment of his research was unfair because his summaries were written for a general audience.

He said, if given the chance again, he would publish his early studies in an academic journal.

Lewinski's research centres on the argument that an officer is at a disadvantage when confronting a potential suspect.

In his study from 1999, he timed students as they fired while turning, running or sitting with a gun at their side, as if stashed in a car's console.

He concluded suspects could reach, fire and move fast. Then in his third study from 2002, he concluded that it took the average officer about a second and a half to draw from a holster, aim and fire, placing them at a disadvantage, the Times reported.

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And when the evidence clearly shows something other than this, Lewinski has reportedly explained the unexplainable — that the officer suffered from “inattentive blindness”, which occurs when the brain focuses on one task and blocks out all others.

When challenged over how to distinguish between inattentive blindness and lying, Lewinski concedes there is no way of knowing.

But it’s not just his non-peer-reviewed research that has led some to question his objectivity.

It’s also the fact Lewinski’s consulting business, Force Science Institute, has trained thousands of police officers to think differently about police shootings that might appear excessive.

This is what some say set him apart from other professional witnesses.

But even those who have publicly criticised him use him when then need.

The US Department of Justice recently paid him \$55,000 to help defend a federal drug agent who shot and killed an unarmed 18-year-old in California, The New York Times reported.

It also, as part of a settlement over excessive force in the Seattle Police Department last year, sent officers to Lewinski for training. And in January this year, paid him a further \$15,000 to train federal marshals.

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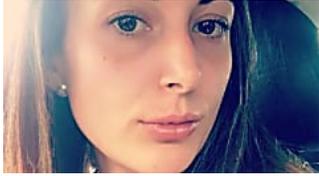
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